

Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to have a chance address you in this session. Since it is the first time that I am taking the floor, on behalf of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities based in the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, I would like to thank the Government of Kazakhstan for providing us with the opportunity to convene with this distinguished group to discuss the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Central Asia.

I would also like to express our appreciation to the OSCE Centre in Astana for hosting this event and for their generous contribution to make it happen.

Furthermore, I would like to extend our thanks to the OSCE field operations in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan for their support in bringing a wide variety of stakeholders around this table from respective countries.

Last but not least, I would like to express our thanks to our partner -the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat with whom we have been co-operating since 2002 closely in furthering the implementation of the Convention not only in this region but also in South Caucasus, Eastern Europe and South Eastern Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OSCE is first and foremost a security organization. Our work in the economic and environmental fields is an important and integral component of our comprehensive approach to security.

My Office, the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, has a mandate to monitor and counter threats and challenges to security and stability caused by economic and environmental factors.

Environmental challenges ignore political boundaries. Transboundary water management, land degradation, hazardous waste management, climate change adaptation and conservation of natural resources, all require co-operation and partnership among neighbouring countries. Not surprisingly, these issues also have significant security implications. But at the same time, the very characteristics of environmental issues make them excellent candidates for co-operation and confidence building. More and more it is also becoming evident such co-operation also necessitates active engagement of civil society.

It was with this understanding that, a decade ago, we introduced the Aarhus Centres Initiative in close co-operation with the Convention Secretariat.

The idea was to create Centres that would provide citizens and civil society organizations with a point of call for acquiring environmental information, taking part in environmental decision-making and being informed on their rights as provided by the national and international legislation.

Scattered at first, the Centres quickly multiplied and developed into a sizable network of 37 Aarhus Centres that now covers 10 countries in the OSCE region and the network keeps growing.

I am pleased to see several Aarhus Centre Managers from this region together with us today.

With the expansion of the Network, the governance of Aarhus Centres also advanced. Most of them work on the basis of annual work plans developed by their respective Advisory Boards that include representatives of central and local governments and civil society organizations.

The activity portfolio of the Centres has likewise been expanding. As you have heard yesterday and today, the Aarhus Centres are actively engaged in all three pillars of the Convention and also in the PRTR Protocol: they raise environmental awareness; disseminate environmental information; organize public hearings on a variety of issues including on priority environmental problems, on projects and programmes with potential adverse environmental impacts; on draft environmental policy and legislation; they provide legal advice to citizens on their environmental rights, etc.

The Centres are flexible in their approach, taking into account local needs and capacities, their geographic location and political climate where they operate.

Who supports Aarhus Centres?

The Aarhus Centres are supported by several OSCE participating States, the OSCE field operations and mainly through the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative.

ENVSEC is a partnership of 6 organizations: OSCE, UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, and NATO as an associate partner. The Initiative aims to address environmental challenges within and across countries that might have security implications. It aims to transform risks into co-operation. And in this respect, the Aarhus Centres constitute the civil society leg of the Initiative and serve as its public outreach facilities at the local level..

Let me now list some of the **primary strengths** of the Aarhus Centres:

- Their participatory nature
- Their decentralized structure
- Their function as bridging between government and civil society extended also to academia, business and media

- The support they receive from central and local governmental authorities
- Their potential to mobilize public interest and response on an environmental issue as well as their potential to unite civil society organizations around a specific theme that require collective action
- Their role as a recognized and respected partner by the citizens, civil society, business and others
- The networking among them within and across the countries
- The fact that they are closer to the local problems and thus closer to the solutions as well.

What are the **primary challenges?**

- There is still a strong need to enrich their capacities and know how.

- Institutional set-ups – each type of institutional set-up offers advantages but also disadvantages – The Centres that are hosted by the governmental organizations may have better access to environmental information and may have higher chances of being financially secure. Whereas the Centres hosted by the local administrations or NGOs may be much closer to the citizens and more attentive to their needs and concerns. That is the reason, why we have combined approach. In most of the countries the Centres in capitals are hosted by the Ministries of Environment and the others in the regions are hosted by local governments and NGOs.

- Legal identity of Aarhus Centres is another challenge that we are discussing among ourselves. This is of course also related to the financial resource needs and overall sustainability of the Aarhus Centers.

In terms of **next steps:**

- We will continue our efforts to make sure that the Aarhus Centres are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge, expertise and technical and financial means to serve as resource centres for implementation of the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention. This would need the support of all of us around this table today.

- We need to invest more on the networking and experience sharing among them and through them among all the stakeholders. For instance, tomorrow we will have a meeting among Aarhus Centre Managers from this region. Annually we also organize meetings that bring together all Aarhus Centre stakeholders from all countries and in these meetings, we benefit significantly from the expertise and contributions of the Convention Secretariat.

- We will focus more on the Gender Mainstreaming into Aarhus Center Activities – The OSCE Gender Unit together with us recently developed some guidelines on how to gender the Aarhus activities.

- Youth will continue to be our primary target group in our work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In only a few weeks time, the Rio+20 Conference will start,

The Aarhus Convention represents a major step forward in advancing sustainable development through strengthening democracy and environmental protection. It is a direct response to the Principle 10 of 1992 Rio Declaration.

The Aarhus Centres are also important players in this respect among several others. They demonstrate that change is indeed possible when all sides work together in a spirit of partnership.

In concluding I would like to thank you all for your contributions and look forward to concrete outcomes of this meeting.